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FM AMCONSUL JEDDAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1390
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 8393
RUEHYN/AMEMBASSY SANAA 0173
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN 0067

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000228

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DEPT FOR NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/14/2014
TAGS: [ECON](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: ASIR, SAUDI ARABIA: EIGHT YEARS AFTER 9/11:
EDUCATION, COMMERCE, TOURISM, YEMEN AND RAIN

REF: A. 08JEDDAH16
[1](#)B. 07JEDDAH512

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)
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[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: ConGen May 12-13 visit to Abha, Asir Province in Saudi Arabia, revealed a region working double-time to fund quality education for its population, nearly eight years after at least six Asiri natives (assumed by locals to be uneducated, brainwashed youth) took part in the 9/11 attacks.

Asir is distinctly middle class -- neither conspicuously affluent nor conspicuously poor -- with definite room for fostering additional US-Saudi business ties. The Abha Chamber of Commerce and Industry presents itself as highly professional and ready to find suitable commercial partners for American franchises. While Asir enjoys a moderate climate due to its high elevation (five to seven thousand feet above sea level) and has a wealth of potential touristic attractions, progress is slow in building its tourism industry. Neighboring Yemen looms against the background of Asir's progress with constant reminders of a porous border that presents security concerns to the region and Kingdom at large. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) COURTESY CALL ON GOVERNOR: On May 12 Consul General and Consulate officers met with Prince Faisal bin Khalid bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Governor of Asir. The Prince expressed a hope for an increase in regional tourism, explaining that the Saudi economy is facing a hit -- albeit not as bad as other countries during the current global economic crisis. The Governor has concerns about the Yemeni border situation, noting that the Yemenis crossing illegally into Saudi Arabia are usually motivated by economic reasons and that many return to Kingdom after being deported to Yemen. Prince Faisal sees the issue as a regional security concern.

[1](#)3. (SBU) CHAMBER OF COMMERCE PROMOTING ABHA: The delegation met the Abha Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) including Board Chairman Abdullah S. Almobyty. The Chairman expressed particular interest in developing the mining, education, and health care sectors as well as a desire to work with US companies: "We would be happy if we had some American companies here." Waxing nostalgic about the November 2007 US Commerce and Culture festival held in Abha with Consulate Jeddah coordination (ref A), Almobyty encourages US businesses to locate in Abha, lamenting that trade delegations tend to go to Riyadh and Jeddah but never the Asir. Assuring officers that the ACCI would support franchise businesses by finding appropriate partners, Almobyty said the Chamber offers English classes in-house through the Wall Street Institute and is pledged to foster cooperation.

14. (SBU) KING KHALID UNIVERSITY PUSHING AHEAD: Education emerged as a central visit theme. Dr. Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Abdullah Al Rashed, President of King Khaled University, explained that the University recently merged several other institutions of higher education to create one of the largest learning centers in the Kingdom with seventy thousand students. A tour of the dental school revealed state-of-the-art equipment being used to serve a significant population with timely, inexpensive public health dental services. Other parts of the University appeared well-maintained with modern in-room technology, knowledgeable instructors, and interested students. The university president encourages students to study in the United States despite concerns over the visa process and name checks (many Asiris share similar names with some of the 9/11 hijackers due to the limited number of tribes in the region and common first names). While men and women students are segregated, university officials consistently commented that teaching and technology are being utilized to maximize learning opportunities for both genders. (Note: Conoffs did not have an opportunity to meet with women during the visit.)

15. (SBU) ABHA TECHNICAL COLLEGE ENCOURAGES SAUDIZATION: A presentation at the Abha Technical College showed an attempt by officials to integrate graduates into work fields traditionally reserved for foreigners. One administrator noted the effort to encourage Saudi students to adopt "a blue gown instead of a white thobe," acknowledging the difficult challenge of moving students' mindsets away from management-oriented white collar work towards blue collar occupations: "This is the issue we are facing at the cultural level. We are still trying to convince teenagers that a blue collar job can be their future."

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16. (C) IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN YEMEN?: Abdulaziz S. A. Al-Mathami, Assistant General Manager at Al-Watan Newspaper, and former staff member at the Saudi Embassy in Washington, said that Iran is contributing to an increased threat by inciting the Al-Houthi tribe of Shi'a in northern Yemen. (Note: The Al-Houthi are from the Zaydi branch of Shi'ism, often thought to be among the most moderate Shi'a and closest to Sunnis in their belief system.) While Al-Mathami was unable to provide further information about Iranian intentions, he suggested that there was likely some link to terrorism and perhaps coordination with Al-Qaeda. Al-Mathami was not able to provide specific information nor was he able to explain why the Shi'a and Al-Qaeda would form an alliance. Al-Mathami stressed that Iran is a threat to the Kingdom and seemed more intent on having American officers leave with that impression rather than to provide any details of the connection.

17. (C) AFTERMATH OF 9/11: Nearly eight years after at least six young men from Asir participated in the attacks of 9/11, the subject does not come up easily. Abha officials and elites avoid the topics and clearly prefer to showcase the region's educational and commercial achievements rather than confront a sensitive and painful blast from the past. According to Said Al-Asmri, Secretary General of the Abha Chamber of Commerce and Industry, most Asiris strongly doubt that so many young men from their region were involved in the 9/11 attack. The usual explanation is that the educational level in the Asir is too low to have allowed the men to orchestrate the attacks. The other hypothesis is that they were brainwashed. Al-Asmri agreed that the 9/11 incident left the Asir region with an even more negative public image than it had before. Most Jeddah residents known to conoffs claim never to have visited Asir or, if they have, only once long ago. To a sophisticated Jeddawi, Abha is the ultimate Dullsville.

18. (SBU) TOURISM POTENTIAL: Abha is interested in exploiting tourism, but it is less clear that steps toward promoting

this potentially income-earning sector are moving forward. With its year-round cool weather, astounding vistas, cable cars connecting inner-city points with towns below, Abha would seem to be an ideal location for domestic and other Gulf region holiday-makers. Nevertheless, the airport is small, first class hotels are limited in number, and the holiday season is mostly confined to the summer -- when the rest of Saudi Arabia is baking in the heat. For example, the luxury Intercontinental Hotel at Jebel Sooda, the Kingdom's highest point at ten thousand feet, twenty minutes by car from Abha, is open only for two months per year. It was explained that flights to Cairo might begin soon, but also suggested that more Saudis would travel from Abha to Cairo for vacations rather than Egyptians to the Asir. Cultural tourism opportunities abound including an impressive and well-planned cultural museum and village (Bin Humsan Village in nearby Khamees Mushayt) as well as the unusual town of Al Habla, an oasis hanging on the edge of a cliff. Limited advertising of these attractions and restrictions on tourism in the Kingdom (virtually no tourist visas and prohibitions on allowing Umrah/Haj pilgrims to visit areas outside Mecca and Medina) appear unlikely to make Abha an international tourist destination.

¶9. (U) AL HABLA IN THE RAIN: Shortly after descending by cable car over the massive cliff's edge to the town of Al Habla, ConGen officers experienced the heaviest rainfall (accompanied by lightning and hail) reported in decades. Al Habla's small community of "flower men" were once able to access the main land over the high cliffs towering above the village only by means of passing through rugged canyons and using ropes to raise themselves above sheer rock walls. Two decades ago the community of 200 villagers were encouraged to move "uptown" by authorities, and a cable car installed to allow visitors to tour the town, kept Al Habla partially preserved as an historic cultural village. Woefully unprepared for a rain storm, without umbrellas or raincoats, the consulate delegation huddled under shelters before making its way to a primitive, ancient one-room house. The freak storm gave Saudi hosts an opportunity to demonstrate to American guests the ceremonial guns, swords, and other items on display. With waterfalls cascading over the cliff sides and plummeting hundreds of feet to the valley below, Asiri children enjoyed a rare opportunity for water play.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: At first glance, educational development seems the element of Asiri society that is moving into the fast lane -- with technology and ample funds clearly focused

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on that effort. Opportunities for additional US business to enter the region seem realistic with the middle class city having few if any American establishments, but with a population likely to have both appetite and means to enjoy US products. (Residents already carry Burger King meals and boxes of Dunkin' Donuts on flights from Jeddah to Asir.) Future visits by the US Mission may lead to deeper understanding of the region; the 50-minute flight makes Abha a realistic day or weekend trip. The role of women in Asir society is something that Consulate delegation was not able to assess, but the impression is that the current status and public life of women in the Asir may be closer to the restrictive environment of the Najd than to the comparative liberation of the Hejaz. END COMMENT.
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